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Les Cowboys Fringants before record launch: (from left) Karl Tremblay, Jean-François Pauzé, Dominique Lebeau, Jérôme Dupras and Marie-Annick Lépine.

Cowboys | Real people inhabit their songs

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A striking aspect of the Cowboys' music is its total absence of navel-gazing. Pauzé says he's not keen on writing songs about himself, "perhaps because I was inspired by great composers like Richard Desjardins, Gilles Vigneault and Pierre Lalrraverse who write about others. Personally, I don't think my inner life is that interesting. I like songs that tell stories. I'm much more comfortable drawing from my surroundings, as much from other individuals as from society in general. I think what interests people is la vie collective that everybody can recognize and identify with in different ways.

"Whether I write about a person or society, it's the same process – I go about it with the eye of the observer. When I write a political song like 8 Secondes, about the takeover of our water by the cartels, it's important that it's well-documented. I don't want to say just anything, and I'm trying to look at and say things objectively. But, it's ma vision à moi, right or wrong, and I write these songs to stir some debate."

"If I haven't understood what he's saying, I force him to rework it," Marie-Annick Lépine says with a smile, "so then he knows everybody can understand him!" She cited En attendant, which tackles the political process of neo-liberalism, as originally "too technical, so he changed it to more how people speak every day. It's not having big words or slogans like politicos use three-quarters of the time." Big words, adds Pauzé, "might be masturbatory for some, but they do nothing for me!"

The pacing of La Grand-Messe embraces astonishing shifts in moods and emphasis over the 16 numbers, which total an hour. At least half are sharply political. 8 Secondes has the European Gypsy feel of 1930s agit-prop, when songs passed the news and stirred the soul, in this case how multi-corps poison our water and then charge for it. It's an urgent plea, and makes no apology for it. It's followed by Plus rien, which is nothing less than the last dying man on Earth testifying how avarice got the better of the human race. En attendant strafes neo-liberalism (and election-eering in general), while Lettre à Lévesque invokes René's inclusiveness against extremists, and Si la vie vous intéresse spits at mindless consumption in "Un univers où l'verbe avoir / a pris l'dessus sur le verbe être."

Real people inhabit their songs, not the egos of stars or wannabes. Hannah describes the solitude of insecurities, while Ti-Cul is an affectionate poke at a pampered young man desperate to break into acting. Symphonie pour Caza is a classically structured ode to a perennially "magnanil" life-of-the-party: "Y'a les deux yeux pochés qui flottent dans graise de bines / Dans son corps y'a aucun vitamine."

The arrangements don't take the easy route of clichés. Classically inspired trumpet and trombone fanfares abound, courtesy of Ivanhoe Jolicoeur and David Jespersen. Lépine's rigour on violin and her taut multi-instrumental embroidery are dominant throughout. Drummer Dom Lebeau also contributes the tangy, twangy instrumental Shish taouk.

Pauzé composed the songs at home in L'Assomption, then presented them to the others one or two at a time so they could each add ideas for arrangements. They met in a practice hall once or twice a week over the first half of the year, took sojourns in a chalet in St-Charles-de-Mandeville, then recorded in producer Robert Langlois's Studio 270 in Outremont between June and last month. The finished product reflects a band in full possession of its means.

"We didn't feel any pressure of meeting a fixed release date, so we could work at our own rhythm," says Lépine. "If I wasn't ready for a song because I hadn't decided how to approach it, I could wait three weeks or a month before the ideas came together. The album is out now, but it might've come out a year from now. But things went so well that by October we were super-proud of it and decided it was time."

"The two years of constant touring paid off," says Dupras, "because we really know each other well, so that we could each add our own personal things to the songs at home, while knowing what the other was working on. It was much less laborious than the five of us being cooped up for weeks on end trying things. You know, first versions are sometimes hard to listen to, and easier to digest at home."

The Cowboys "effect" on the local music industry is no small matter. La Grand-Messe puts the capper on an unparalleled year of creativity in Québécois pop. Pauzé is proud that Les Cowboys provided a template for success: they developed a fan base on community and college radio and TV (their first media performance was in 1997). The fan reaction to these appearances created the demand for private radio to finally add Toune d'automne to their tight playlists.

"It remains true that if you want to sell a lot of albums you've got to get played on commercial radio," Pauzé says. "Toune d'automne changed everything for us. It's a bit the same for Les Trois Accords; they played in the shadows until Hawaïenne got picked up, then boom, 50,000 albums.

"Maybe we're an inspiration to new bands the way Les Colocs were for us," he continues, referring to an irreverent underground success that enlivened the deadly 1990s locally, along with Jean Leloup.

The importance of Bandeapart fm, Radio Canada's late-night weekend new-music show, cannot be underestimated, Pauzé said. Community radio is critical in creating a demand that private stations, sooner or later, must heed. "An artist who only sold 5,000 albums never got played on radio," added Dupras. "Now they're beginning to take a few risks."

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Settling in at La Tulipe

Quebec's favourite Cowboys kick off a new tour supporting La Grand-Messe in St-Jean tonight. They'll hit Montreal early in the new year with mini-residencies at the historic La Tulipe, built in 1913 as Le Dominion in the heart of eastern Plateau Mont-Royal, where comic actor Gilles Latulippe established his Théâtre des Variétés in 1967. In September it was purchased and restored in rich, dark colours by La Compagnie Larivée Chabot Champagne, who run the busy indie La Tribu label that's guided Les Cowboys. "It's going to be fun playing so often here, it's a beautiful building with beautiful memories," says Jean-François Pauzé. Doubtless there will be additional Montreal shows, but these are the dates at La Tulipe, 4530 Papineau Ave., (514) 528-5000: Jan. 17, 18, 24 and 25, and Feb. 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 15, 16, 21 and 22. Tickets cost $20.70, at Le Cabaret, 2111 St. Laurent Blvd., (514) 845-2014, or through Admission (514) 790-1245.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

During Monday's launch party at La Tulipe for Les Cowboys Fringants' new CD La Grand-Messe, songwriter and guitarist Jean-François Pauzé signs copies of the album for fans.

Les Cowboys' jukebox

After travelling Quebec for the better part of two years, Les Cowboys Fringants had some time to listen to records during the 10 months they prepared La Grand-Messe. Here's a selection of what they got into:

Marie-Annick Lépine, 26, violin, accordion, mandolin, etc: Noir Désir, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, the Dears, Thomas Fersen, Belle et Sebastien. "Stefie Shock (Le décor) was my summer album for dancing."

Jérôme Dupras, 25, bass: "I'm never without my Jaco Pastorious discs and other jazzy things I practice with. But I like the McGarrigle sisters (above all The French Album), Mickey 3D for his globalism, Les Trois Accords – their absurdism is energizing."

Jean-François Pauzé, 29, songwriter-guitarist: "I don't listen a lot because I'm writing. I like songs that tell stories, like the last Richard Desjardins (Kanasutal), Urbain Desbois, I love the last Vincent Vallières disc, Thomas Fersen, Dumas."

Dominique Lebeau, 29, drums: "I love shopping for records. I've already got all the long-plays ever recorded," he cracks, "so now I'm into 45s. Lots of '50s and '60s. Soul, funk, James Brown. I hear things, but I'm not locked in to three or four discs at a time."

Karl Tremblay, 28, singer: "I finish my days with video games! But I listened to Godspeed You! Black Emperor, there was a Doors box-set, a lot of Quebec artists, like Urbain Desbois and Vincent Vallières, any style, hip-hop like the new Loco Locass (Amour oral)."

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